

Nassau Med Center Head Quits

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Problems at the county hospital led Caso
to press for Collins' replacement

By David Zinman
Newsday Science Writer

East Meadow—Under pressure from Nassau County Executive Caso, Dr. James F. Collins announced his retirement yesterday from his \$52,000 post as superintendent of Nassau County Medical Center.

Collins disclosed his intention to step down at a special meeting of the center's board of managers, who agreed to let him stay on until June 1.

At the same time, Caso announced that he planned to name a committee to begin a nationwide search for a new superintendent of the county-owned hospital. He said he would form the group in collaboration with the center's nine-member board of managers. "We intend to scour the nation for the very best we can find," Caso said.

The board also accepted the resignation of Dr. J. Martin Semer as chairman of the psychiatry department. The department, which has run what the State Mental Hygiene Department has called a "totally inept" operation, was recently cut off from \$400,000 in state aid. Semer, whose resignation is effective March 21, said he has been asked to say on as a staff doctor. He said he has not made any decision.

Collins' retirement announcement and Semer's resignation followed disclosures of a number of problems at the hospital. In addition to the psychiatry department funds, the center's open-heart surgery program was partially suspended in September after it failed to get state approval. The hospital also received a provisional one-year accreditation rating in December after the accreditors' report listed 49 deficiencies in the center's operation. In addition, the center has been criticized by consumer groups for failing to open to the public the monthly meetings of its policy-making board of managers. Recently, it was disclosed that Collins permitted full-time staff doctors to moonlight during day-time working hours.

In the announcement of Collins' retirement, there was no reference to those problems, only that the statement that Collins, 62, wanted to take a "well-deserved rest and vacation." Collins, who has been superintendent since 1963, said he had not been asked to leave. He said he had been considering retirement for some time but had wanted to see the new 19-story, \$62,000,000 Dynamic Care Building dedicated

and opened before making any decision. The dedication took place in October. "I go proudly," he said, "feeling I have done the best I could and achieved the objectives I set out to reach. I'm going out bloody but unbowed," he was overheard saying in the corridors.

Board members declined to comment, and Caso was not available for comment. Nevertheless, county government insiders said it was clear that Caso had forced Collins out. The county executive has been increasingly unhappy about the unfavorable publicity the center has been getting. That publicity reflected indirectly on Caso, who as county executive is ultimately responsible for Nassau's public hospital.

Appointment Backfired

Last month, in an effort to change the center's image, Caso appointed Dr. Bernard J. Ficcara, an Upper Brookville surgeon, as a trouble-shooter to assist Collins. To Caso's embarrassment, the plan backfired when Ficcara's credentials proved unacceptable to some members of the medical community. Ficcara then refused the appointment.

Then came the news of the withdrawal of \$400,000 in state aid to the psychiatry department, a loss that may have to be made up through a tax increase next year. That may have been the last straw, sources say.

Last Thursday, Caso called the center's board of managers, whom he appoints, to a meeting in his office. According to sources close to the board, he outlined the hospital's problems and made it clear that Collins' resignation was called for. Collins reportedly learned of the meeting and, after contacting some board members, recognized that he had little chance of stopping the board from doing what Caso wanted.

Hospital insiders speculate that less than a year ago Collins might have swung the board his way. At that time, the board had only five members—attorneys, businessmen and other establishment figures. Some had worked with Collins since his appointment by former Democratic County Executive Eugene Nickerson. One member has since died and another's term expired. Caso, noting the movement toward

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consumerism, named two replacements and added four more members to the board. It was this new board, whose members Collins hardly knew, that met in closed session yesterday and, sources said, reached agreement to ask him to resign. When Collins came into the meeting, he apparently anticipated their action and reportedly took the initiative by requesting to stay until June 1 before retiring. The board consented.

'Dedicated Doctor'

Collins will receive full pay through August 1 in line with the county policy that allows 60 days' pay after retiring. He also will get a pension of about \$9,000 a year for his 11 years of service. Under county rules, he could have stayed on eight more years before retirement became mandatory at the age of 70.

Health professionals praised his years at the center. "Collins is a dedicated doctor who had done many good things for Nassau," said Henry Bang, executive vice president of the Long Island Hospital Review and Planning Council. "Perhaps he feels that now that the new hospital has been built, he has made his maximum contribution."

Jack Dillman, executive director of the Nassau-Suffolk Hospital Council said he was shocked. "I'm really disappointed he's leaving the scene," Dillman said. "He's provided the institution with good leadership during the formative years of the center and has been doing a darned good job to work out the problems, despite recent reports in your paper." On the other hand, Joan Saltzman, executive director of the Community Advocates, a consumer-oriented health group, said Collins was himself "part of its [the center's] problems."

The committee to find Collins' successor will include one or more representatives from the board of managers, medical personnel and private citizens.

Editorial
Newsday

Feb. 27, 1974

Rising 19 stories from the flat Nassau plain, the county's new \$62,000,000 medical center symbolizes civic pride, medical progress, human compassion—and a good bit of ineptitude.

Including a power plant, staff housing and a parking garage, the project will cost the people of Nassau more than \$80,000,000. They're paying for the best, but so far they're not getting it.

Last year the center was forced to abandon its open-heart surgery program, which had never received state approval. In October, the State Department of Mental Hygiene cut off funds to the medical center's psychiatry department, calling its program "inefficient" and "totally inept." Now the National Institute of Mental Health is threatening to end federal funding of the same program because it's not being conducted in compliance with federal regulations. The state action cost the center about \$500,000. The federal threat could mean the loss of \$300,000 more.

The people of Nassau deserve better. County Executive Caso is not a medical man, but he's the chief executive of the county, and the buck stops at his desk. Thus far his response to the problems of the medical center has been inadequate. Recently he took such scant care in appointing a special assistant to help him improve the center that the appointee was forced to decline the job under the most embarrassing circumstances.

If the people of Nassau are to get the kind of medical care they're paying for, the county executive is going to have to organize a major shakeup in the hospital's administration. At the very least, that's going to require time and great care to pick the right man to do the job.